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THE REALITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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STUDY III

THE MEANING OF GOD IN EXPERIENCE

The word "God" stands for two quite different ideas.

In the first place "God" is a philosophical term to designate the ultimate reality upon which everything depends. God, so conceived, is the "First Cause," the "Absolute," mysterious, vast, incomprehensible, always hidden from us by the world, accessible only by long and elaborate arguments.

But there is a second meaning to the word "God" which is characteristic of religious experience. Here God is a spiritual companion, speaking directly to man's heart, strengthening and comforting and inspiring. We reason about the philosopher's God. We *pray* to the God of religious experience.

In this study we are concerned to see what God means in religious experience. When the mysterious and vast power which orders and sustains the universe is felt as a spiritual presence in one's inner life wonderful things occur. The religious man finds a glory and a moral purpose in the world. Dark places are illumined. Instead of feeling dismayed and oppressed by the vastness of the universe, man comes to know that it is his spiritual home where loving companionship may be found, and life takes on new dignity. The movements of history are seen to be pointing to great moral ends. To know God gives a new kind of confidence and joy.

For convenience' sake we shall consider three general aspects of the realization of God in experience: (1) God as the Lord of the universe; (2) God as the Providence guiding human history; (3) God as the companion of the inner life.

GOD AS THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE

First day.—§ 31. Forget for a moment all that you know about astronomy, geology, and biology. Imagine yourself living in a time when men thought the

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world a flat disk a few hundred miles in diameter with water all about it. They thought also that many gods had produced the various elements and forms of life. In that state of mind read Gen. 1:1—2:4. What does it make you think about God? Consider how you would feel in a universe thus wonderfully formed. What then was the experience of God that produced this chapter?

Second day.—§ 32. Read Job, chap. 38. The book of Job represents the struggle of a soul with the awful problem of suffering. In the preceding chapters Job's friends have told him that he is being punished for sin and he has rejected the theory with indignation. He grows angry as his friends offer their little commonplace explanations. At last in this chapter the Lord speaks to Job out of the storm. He explains nothing, but reveals the wonders of the universe, asking Job if he can understand them. The poor sufferer is calmed and repents that he ever doubted the great Providence that cares for all things (42:5, 6). He gained comfort, courage, patience from his experience of God in meditating upon the meaning of the universe. Is there anything like this in your own contemplation of nature?

Third day.—§ 33. Read Ps. 8. Think of the Psalmist as looking up to the starry heavens. What thought of God comes to him? Read Ps. 19:1—6. What does the contemplation of the wonder of the sun do for the singer? Read Addison's hymn, "The Spacious Firmament on High." (Consult any good hymn book.) What experience does this bring to you?

Fourth day.—Read Ps. 147. The Psalmist is happy to think that the wonderful God who is administering the universe is also guiding the destinies of his people. How safe this made him feel! Can we think of the orderly processes of nature with something of the same feeling? Do you have any religious experience in your contemplation of nature?

Fifth day.—§ 34. Read Matt. 6:25—34. What message came to Jesus from the flowers and birds? Think of the whole passage as reflecting his own experience of triumph over anxiety and confidence in God who knows all about our needs. The translation "take no thought" is unfortunate; it should be "do not worry." Turn to St. Francis' beautiful utterance in Study I, sec. 7, and compare it with this utterance of Jesus.

Sixth day.—§ 35. Did you ever think what life would be like if we could not depend upon the faithfulness of Nature's laws? if we could not be sure of recurring seasons, of rain and sunshine, of growth of crops, of the regularity of the operation of the laws of gravitation. This orderliness of nature is one aspect of God's control. It is especially evident in the majestic, silent sweep of the stars. The astronomer, Kepler, overcome by the significance of the invariable laws which he had discovered guiding the motion of the stars, exclaimed, "I do think God's thoughts after him." The following utterance of his shows what it means to realize that the universe is God's creation: "The Wisdom of the Lord is infinite, as are also his glory and his power. Ye heavens, sing his praises: Sun, moon and planets, glorify him in your ineffable language! Praise him, celestial harmonies, and all ye who can comprehend them! And thou, my soul, praise thy creator! It is by him, and in him that all exist."

Have you ever experienced the overwhelming sense of awe which comes from realization of the immensity of the universe in a starlit night? Would Kepler's utterance give one a sense of companionship with the stars? Compare it with

Ps. 8 and with Ps. 148 as well as with the great hymn, "The Spacious Firmament on High."

Seventh day.—§ 36. Tennyson's poem, "The Higher Pantheism," is an eloquent portrayal of the alternating moods which the world creates in us. We *feel* that there must be a heavenly glory, radiant and wonderful; but it is hard always to be *sure* of it. A portion of the poem is given here. Read the entire poem if you can.

The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills, and the plains—
Are not these, O Soul, the vision of him who reigns?
Dark is the world to thee: Thyself is the reason why;
For is He not all but thou, that hast power to feel "I am I"?
Glory about thee, without thee; and thou fulfillest thy doom,
Making him broken gleams, and a stifled splendor and gloom.
Speak to him thou, for he hears, and spirit with spirit can meet.
Closer is he than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.

If there is a divine spirit moving in nature would you be able to know that fact without some longing for companionship? Is the faith which leads one to this quest a necessary means of realizing the presence of God? In the last couplet quoted, notice how near God is when one ventures in faith to try to talk with God.

Eighth day.—Not only the immensity of nature but also the marvel of delicate beauty suggests the presence of God. Study Tennyson's exquisite lines:

Flower in the crannied wall
I pluck you out of the crannies;—
Hold you here, root and all in my hand
Little flower;—but if I could understand
What you are, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.

Compare with this Wordsworth's:

To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that too often lie too deep for tears.

When you think of the wonderful process by which a flower blooms, are you not very close to the divine presence? Would our experience of God be richer if we gave more attention to the beauties of nature? Notice that Tennyson says "if." Recall by way of contrast the clear certainty of Jesus in Matt. 6:25-34.

Ninth day.—Review the work of the previous eight days and make a list of ways in which men may find God in nature. We are inclined to limit our religious experience to what we find in church or in conventional ways of worship. The great religious spirits of the Bible lived much out of doors. Jesus taught in the open air. Would not our experience of God be greatly deepened if we were to cultivate a spiritual acquaintance with nature?

GOD AS THE PROVIDENCE GUIDING HUMAN HISTORY

Tenth day.—§ 37. One of the most important aspects of religious experience is a faith that God is guiding the events of history. Even in war and distress the religious man may thus be filled with glowing ardor.

Read Isa. 10:5-23. This oration was spoken in Jerusalem when the invading Assyrians were sweeping down upon the land. Isaiah believes that he can see God's intention to punish Judah for her sins. But he condemns the cruel enemy who has forgotten that he is the instrument of God. We may not feel able to speak so definitely as did the prophet of the meaning of these historic events, but we do feel that the march of human history shows the working of a great righteousness; so the destruction of the Assyrians was interpreted (Isa. 37:36). The incident seems to have inspired Ps. 46, and that in turn Luther's hymn *Ein' feste Burg*. Read these poems and consider the experience of God reflected in them.

Eleventh day.—§ 38. Read Deut. 28:1-25. This solemn message is an effort to make an ethical interpretation of history—the performance of national duty brings national blessing. We today should not put the matter so definitely perhaps. But does not our faith in the divine justice in human affairs give us comfort and courage and the basis for a genuine optimism?

Twelfth day.—§ 39. Read Dan. 2:31-45. The image is intended to represent in its different metals the great empires down to the time when Antiochus, the king of Syria, was trying to destroy the Jews. The writer who lived in this latter time tells the striking story of the past in order to comfort his people with the faith that the climax of the great human drama is at hand. God is about to inaugurate a new and righteous kingdom. A little persecuted people might well believe that only God could save them. But we with our blessed opportunities of making the world better should not slavishly adopt their thought. We exhibit our faith, not by indulging in speculations about the "end of the world," but in honest effort to work with God for an ever better world.

God did not intervene in history in exactly the way in which this prophet expected; but his faith is a noble inspiration to all who are eager for a better kind of world.

Thirteenth day.—§ 40. Read Heb., chap. 11, the roll of honor of the Hebrew heroes. How did these men live thus heroically? By their faith in God; note vs. 27. The mightiest influence to keep men true, courageous, ready to consecrate themselves and to die for a future which they will not live to see is the faith that God has a great enterprise on hand in which they are participants. Note Heb. 11:40 and 12:1 which express the uplifting power of feeling that one is an active participant in the providential making of history.

Fourteenth day.—§ 41. It is entirely possible for men to be profound believers in the guidance of God in history and yet to be mistaken in their conception of God's actual purposes. Read Jer., chaps. 27, 28. Hananiah is sure that God will deliver his people from foreign dominion within two years. Jeremiah is equally sure that God purposes national disaster. Hananiah's confidence seems at first sight to be a glorious faith. To doubt his prophecy seemed like distrusting God's power. But to provide an exact program for God is precarious. If God acts otherwise, what becomes of one's faith?

Fifteenth day.—Ever since the time of Hananiah there have been zealous men who have thought to make God's guidance of history perfectly clear and definite by assigning precise ways and dates for the divine providence. Read Dan. 9:24-27 for an example of such precision. Events never occurred as here predicted. Fanciful "interpretations" of this passage at the hands of visionary idealists

abound in Christian history. But curious calculations of numbers and dates may be made by one who has no deep experience of God. The truly humble man will acknowledge ignorance where he does not know and seek to learn God's ways by closer communion with him. Read Mark 13:28-32, noting especially vs. 32.

Sixteenth day.—§ 42. Another way in which men often misinterpret God's purposes in history is the assumption that those purposes are to be wrought exclusively through one nation or one institution. Patriotism at such times may express itself in God's name but may breathe a spirit of narrow pride. An example of this is found in Zech. 14:9-21. Read this carefully and ask yourself whether the spirit of vs. 17 is in accord with Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:43-45. By way of contrast read the wonderful prophecy of international fellowship in Isa. 19:23-25. If Zechariah's conception were to prevail, could there be any recognition of God's leadership among Christians who do not go to Jerusalem to worship? A German educator in July, 1917, said: "The whole history of the world is neither more nor less than a preparation for the time when it shall please God to allow the affairs of the universe to be in German hands." How would you criticize this utterance? Would the criticism be equally valid if for the word "German" were substituted the word "Jewish," or "American," or "Catholic," or "Protestant"?

Seventeenth day.—§ 43. In the days of Queen Mary of England there was great confusion of religious ideals. Should England return to Catholicism or should it remain Protestant? If the latter, what kind of Protestantism should be adopted? Bishop Hugh Latimer was one of the noble leaders who believed that a better spiritual apprehension of God's word was more important than political scheming. He was burned at the stake in Oxford, October 16, 1555, in company with Ridley. As the fire was kindled he called out: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out." If one is conscious of living close to God, suffering and even martyrdom may be seen as a way in which God achieves great purposes in human history. Can you name any other martyrs who thus found significance in their death? Read Heb. 12:2, and put in your own words the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death.

Eighteenth day.—§ 44. Study Leonard Bacon's well-known hymn, the first two stanzas of which read:

O God, beneath whose guiding hand
Our exiled fathers crossed the sea;
And when they trod the wintry strand,
With prayer and praise they worshipped thee.

Thou heardest, well pleased, the song, the prayer.
Thy blessing came; and still its power
Shall onward, through all ages, bear
The memory of that holy hour.

In what ways was the consciousness of God's guidance a religious force in the lives of the Pilgrims? Does our knowledge of their faith help us today to realize God's presence in our national life? Put in your own words the religious meaning of the story of the Pilgrim fathers.

Nineteenth day.—Review the work of the last nine days and notice how the presence of God in human history is necessarily conceived in terms of a particular crisis. An *experience* of God is quite different from a general philosophy of providential guidance. Try to imagine the experience of Isaiah, of the author of Deuteronomy, of the author of the Book of Daniel, of the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, of Hananiah, of Zechariah, of a modern German, of Latimer, of an American today. Does such a survey help you to an experience of your own? What does it suggest as to the magnitude of God's purposes?

GOD AS THE COMPANION OF THE INNER LIFE

Twentieth day.—§ 45. Read Ps. 139. Note how intimate is the sense of God. The Psalmist feels an awe in the august universal presence yet he rejoices in it (vss. 23, 24). This song comes out of a deep experience of divine companionship. Read it as a personal expression of your own feeling. Perhaps if we knew the facts some black iniquity would account for vss. 19-22.

Twenty-first day.—Read Pss. 42, 43. It seems to be an exile's song. He is in trouble, taunted by his enemies. He remembers the happy days when he could worship without hindrance. Still he is sure of God, and full of hope. Consider how greatly the experience of God has to do with comfort. Do we know what it is to "thirst for God" (42:1, 2)?

Twenty-second day.—§ 46. Read Jer. 15:15-21. Perhaps of all the prophets Jeremiah had the hardest task. He had to preach a message to people who hated him for his warning words. Often in his intensely personal book he tells us how he prayed, and how his prayer was answered. Note his complaint (vss. 17, 18), his stern joy in his duty (vs. 16), his confidence that God will be with him in the work (vs. 20).

Twenty-third day.—§ 47. In connection with our first study in this series you read the story of the temptation of Jesus. Read again Matt. 4:1-11, a parable of Jesus' struggle over the difficulties of his mission. Note his certainty that he could trust in God, his clear-cut decisions, his ability to see through specious excuses, his complete victory. Temptation came to an end, for it was no longer possible to a soul living in unbroken fellowship with God. What is your own experience of the relation of communion with God to moral victory?

Twenty-fourth day.—§ 48. Read John, chap. 17. Try to appreciate the experience which this prayer expresses. The sense of oneness with God (vss. 11, 21, 23, 25, 26), the sense of mission from God (vss. 4, 8, 18, 25), and the whole prayer, as the most intimate communion. How far is your own prayer a communion resulting in comfort, inner courage, peace, hope?

Twenty-fifth day.—§ 49. Read Rom. 8:26-39. Note the strong tone of confidence rising at last to exaltation. Here is a man perfectly sure of God. All circumstances are helpful (vs. 28), none of the things that dismay men can overcome him (vs. 35), spiritual victory is an abiding experience (vss. 37-39). This letter was written when many perils were about the apostle, but he is united with God and nothing can separate him from that supreme experience.

Twenty-sixth day.—§ 50. The most blessed experience of God is in a sense of personal companionship. Study these sentences from St. Augustine: "O God, thou hast made us for thyself; and our souls are restless until they find rest in

thee. . . . I sought thee at a distance, and did not know that thou wast near. I sought thee abroad, and behold thou wast within me." An experience of God must be found by realizing the presence of God *within*. How would Augustine's words help one to this experience? Would prayer be better than speculation as a means of attaining it?

Twenty-seventh day.—§ 51. Study this prayer of James Martineau:

O God, thou only refuge of thy children, who remainest true, though all else should fail, and livest, though all else die, cover us now when we fly to thee, rebuke within us all immoderate desires, all unquiet temper, all presumptuous expectations, all ignoble self-indulgence, and feeling on us the embrace of thy fatherly hand, may we meekly, and with courage go into the darkest ways of our pilgrimage, anxious not to change thy perfect will, but only to do and bear it bravely.

See if there is anything in your experience suggested by the words "refuge," "cover," "rebuke," "feeling," "do and bear." Does such a prayer as this tell us more or less about God than a theological argument?

Twenty-eighth day.—§ 52. Study the hymn beginning, "Abide with me: fast falls the eventide." It is in every good hymn book. Put in your own words the experience of God suggested by the words, "help," "changest not," "guide and star," "abide with me." How would life be strengthened by the sense of such companionship?

Twenty-ninth day.—Study Watt's great hymn: "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." Make a list of the important affirmations concerning God. Notice how the hymn transforms the meaning of the world and of human life by setting it against the background of the eternal power and love of God. Think what would be lost if one could not make these affirmations. In the light of this hymn does the meaning of God seem to be something which can be lightly passed over?

Thirtieth day.—Review the month's work, and from these studies and from your own experience write your own personal statement of what God means to you. If you will form the habit of putting these meanings into definite form in your prayers, you will find that it deepens your sense of the presence of God.

Thirty-first day.—An interesting testimony comes from the novelist, Mr. H. G. Wells, who is violently hostile to the Christianity of the churches, but who in his book, *God, the Invisible King*, has portrayed an intimate experience of God's presence. Says he:

It is the attainment of an absolute certainty that one is not alone in one's self. It is as if one was touched at every point by a being akin to one's self, sympathetic, beyond measure wiser, steadfast and pure in aim. It is completer and more intimate, but it is like standing side by side with and touching some one that we love very dearly and trust completely. . . . Thereafter one goes about the world like one who was lonely, and has found a lover, like one who was perplexed, and has found a solution. One is assured that there is a power that fights with us against the confusion and evil within us and without. There comes into the heart an essential and enduring happiness and courage.

Mr. Wells's profound experience of God occurred outside the circle of church members. Does a Christian who is exclusive or narrow-minded realize the "wideness of God's mercy"?

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Through what three channels may man experience God?
2. Describe Job's experience of God in the universe.
3. What besides its immensity suggests God in the universe?
4. Does the study of astronomy diminish or increase one's sense of God?
5. Name three psalms other than those in the study which show an experience of God through nature.
6. What part does faith play in our ability to respond to God in nature?
7. Give some references which show how closely Jesus associated God with nature.
8. How did Isaiah interpret God in the events of his times?
9. Do you agree or disagree with the writer of the book of Deuteronomy in his theory that the performance of national duty always brings national prosperity?
10. What is the meaning of Dan. 2:31-35?
11. If we agree with Paul that we may participate with God in the making of history, what opportunity can we see in the present?
12. Name several men outside the Bible whom you think have so participated with God.
13. Against what tendencies should we guard in the interpretation of God in history?
14. Put in your own words the religious meaning of the Pilgrim Fathers.
15. In what qualities of personal communion does the writer of Pss. 139, 42, 43 find satisfaction?
16. What upheld Jeremiah in the hard tasks which he believed that God had given him to do?
17. Why did temptation have no power over Jesus?
18. What persuades us that the God of Jesus and of Paul is as close to us and as responsive to our needs as he was to theirs?
19. Of what value is it to study the religious experiences of men of the past?
20. What does God mean to you?

SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES

The old-fashioned experience meeting has become a thing of the past. Even the pledge of the young people's societies, that each member contribute to every meeting, is no longer interpreted as an opportunity to talk of one's experience. Yet there were certain aspects of these which we miss from our religious life today. Can we by interchange of experience in connection with a *study course* help to enhance the reality of religion and promote a better mutual understanding between Christians? Many experiences of God are not interpreted as such to those who pass through them. To talk over these experiences might help to their right interpretation. We would suggest therefore that the two meetings of this month be particularly informal and that members of the group be encouraged to express themselves freely. The first meeting will probably be more impersonal than the second, since the study proceeds from the God of the universe to the God of the inner life.